

**PARLIAMENTARY INFORMATION SERVICES: THE ROLE OF THE  
LIBRARY AND RESEARCH DEPARTMENTS IN THE ZAMBIAN  
PARLIAMENT IN HELPING MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT MAKE  
BETTER LAWS**

**TO BE PRESENTED BY**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Parliaments play a variety of roles. Their principal roles are those of legislation, representation and oversight. Legislation is about passing laws which constitute a country's legal framework, while representation is about collecting, aggregating and expressing the concerns, opinions and preferences of citizens. Parliamentary oversight is the process in which parliament reviews, monitors and oversees activities of Government and public agencies, including the implementation of policy and legislation on behalf of citizens. The oversight of the Executive, therefore, becomes one of the most important roles of the Legislature as it ensures that policies announced by the Government and authorized by Parliament are actually delivered.

This paper is organized in two parts. Part one of the paper is an overview of the role of the Library Department in providing information and library services to help Members of Parliament make better laws. The second part highlights the role of the Research, Public and International Relations Department in helping Members of Parliament perform their legislative oversight effectively.

## **THE LIBRARY DEPARTMENT**

### **Background**

The Parliamentary Information and Research Library was established in 1953 before independence as a small book collection to service the legislative Council. After the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was dissolved, Zambia was allocated the Federal Assembly Library in the dissolution arrangement. The library service was later reorganised as an important source of information for Parliamentarians. From the onset, the library was designed to provide up-to-date information on all aspects of Zambian political, social, economic and developmental areas. This was based on the Members role which is multifarious.

Initially, the library's collection comprised parliamentary papers such as the Hansard which was later changed to Parliamentary Debates. The collection has since expanded to include other subject areas such as agriculture, law, economics, education and developmental issues which

have a bearing on National development needs. The parliamentary papers include Debates, Bills and Acts, Statutory Instruments, Papers-laid-on the Table, Government Ministries and Departments and Parastatal bodies reports including Budget Speeches.

There is a vast resource of information, but the challenge is how this information is organised, repackaged and the time it takes to make this information accessible.

## **HELPING MEMBERS MAKE BETTER LAWS**

In order to help Parliamentarians make better laws, the following measures are in place to ensure that the process of decision making in the National Assembly is based on factual, up to date information.

### **Indexes and Abstracts**

This is an important source of information as reports are clearly grouped in terms of subject, year, and format. Abstracts are short concise summaries about what information is available in a book, reports and parliamentary papers.

### **Databases**

This is the next level of Abstracts and indexes as it makes use of new Information and Communication Technology (ICTs.). The databases are available on the local area network (LAN) which includes Parliament main buildings and the National Assembly Motel.

In order to enhance accessibility of these databases, a Library Management software called In-magic has been installed in the Library. This therefore, ensures that the information can be searched electronically. In-magic can also be used for online cataloguing, classification and other collection development functions. All these added benefits make it easy to access information resources. The other databases include among others, committee reports, newspapers, staff reports and cardex.

Further, in the advent of the new digital era, the Library Department is looking at the possibility of making use of the mobile phone and other internet devices available for Members of

Parliament to request for information and other documents to be sent to their drop boxes. This is already being piloted by making use of SMSes to send notices to Members of Parliament, regarding the sittings of the House and/or official opening and committee sitting dates. The initiative will also be an avenue for the Library to keep Members of Parliament informed or for them to send requests remotely regardless of whether they are within Parliament buildings or in their constituencies.

### **Training for members of staff**

The Library has a dedicated staff that ensures that Members of Parliament are served as soon as possible. In recognition of the need to have an efficient service, in-house training has included public relations and front office training workshops. The members of staff are also given an opportunity to become well versed in public relations by being part of the secretariat staff of conferences and hence they are able to perform their duties diligently. Training also includes networking with other librarians from public, government, and other special libraries. But most importantly, the interaction between librarians in the parliamentary sector which is the Legislative branch of the government helps add value in ensuring that staff are ably equipped to better serve Members and in turn provide the necessary tools which make Parliamentarians capable of passing good laws.

### **Participation at international conferences**

The Library is an active member of the Zambia Library Association), the Association of Parliamentary Libraries in Eastern, and Southern Africa (APLESA). The participation at international conferences cannot be over-emphasized. By participating at international level through IFLA, our understanding of library services is expanded from the small environment of our libraries to a global view of best practices. Further, with the support of international organizations like the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and other cooperating partners such as International Network of scientific publications (INASP) the information knowledge pool is expanded to include the vast resources that are on the internet and are unlimited.

## **Digitisation**

Digitisation is one of the innovations that has changed the storage and retrieval of information in libraries and the National Assembly of Zambia has taken this innovation as part of the initiative to harness new technologies to meet the changing information needs. The digitization programme was initially funded under the Parliamentary Reforms Programme. Funds were set aside to purchase equipment which included computers, scanners, and storage devices. The funding also catered for the recruitment of consultants to train and ensure quality control. Through this budget line, part-time staff was employed on contracts for six months over a period of two years. Subsequently, the department recently employed one permanent staff whose job description is to spearhead the process of digitization. Once digitization is completed, it is envisaged that Members of Parliament will be able to access digitized documents through mobile devices such as laptops, Smartphones and tablets.

## **COOPERATION WITH OTHER DEPARTMENTS**

### ***The constituency office Library project***

This programme was introduced through the Communications Strategy Policy of the National Assembly as part of the through the Parliamentary Reforms Programme. The project first required the establishing of the right environment to house the collection within the Constituency office. The challenge, however, has been that some constituency offices are renting office space from the Local Government Offices in the district which makes it difficult to actually standardize the surface area. However with the support of the Parliamentary Reforms Department the consensus is to have at least a couple of shelves set up where it is obvious there is no extra separate room which can be dedicated as a Library. After this was agreed, the next stage to go round some selected constituency offices to access what their current documentation status is and this varied. Currently the Library has proposed a library collection guideline to help staff understand how to organise a simple system of shelving and lending system. This will be translated into a database electronically which will be managed by the ICT department which normally accompanies staff from the Parliamentary Reforms Department on administrative tours

to the Constituency offices. The basic documents to be included in the collections were identified as The Constitution of Zambia; Official Opening of Parliament Speeches, parliamentary debates and committee reports and other parliamentary papers which include Government Department reports i.e. Road Development Board, Rural Electrification Board, Constituency Development Fund guidelines, health policy, water and sanitation programmes.

The library also intends to start a collection of CDs and DVDs of recordings of key debates and Committee sittings and these will be made available on loan from the Main Library to the Constituency offices.

### **CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAMMES FOR MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT**

A training room in the Library is available for training Members of Parliament in basic computer skills and other Internet search skills. This was facilitated after the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) sponsored a programme to train parliamentary staff on how to conduct scientific internet research with the view to assist Members of Parliament in policy development. The Library staff help Members carry out internet research on a regular basis. However the formal computer classes are conducted by the ICT department.

In addition, Members of Parliament are oriented at the beginning of each Parliament on the support services available as well parliamentary practice and procedure. This helps Members understand and access information and other advisory support services to help them make better laws.

It cannot be over emphasized that traditional library services should not be undermined as they play a vital role in helping Members make better laws. These include a good efficient and effective reference system to help Members identify what they really need to be able to debate adequately. Also included is the Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI), Readers' Advisory Services and above all a good information retrieval system. Other services include collaboration with other departments such as Journals and Legal Services and Research to help Members understand Parliamentary Practice and Procedure. At the end of the day, all these departments will ultimately use documents and books in the Library as well as Internet facilities of the Library.

## **THE RESEARCH, PUBLIC & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS DEPARTMENT**

Parliamentarians need to have access to accurate, up-to-date, and well-researched information in order to be able to assess legislation and policies in an efficient and effective manner. To achieve this objective, the National Assembly of Zambia has a fully fledged Research Section which falls under the Research, Public and International Relations Department. The Research Department as it was then known was officially established on 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1971 to provide Members of Parliament with readily processed and factual information to enable them carry out their duties effectively, especially that they are too busy to do their own research given their numerous functions.

## **LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT**

The legislative function is one of the key responsibilities of the National Assembly and once the Bill has been presented in the National Assembly, Members of Parliament not only debate and scrutinize the Bill in detail, but also have the power to amend, approve or reject it. In order to have laws and policies that reflect the aspiration of the people they represent, Parliamentarians not only need to have the capacity to analyze and review legislation, but also relevant information. The information is particularly very important if they are to assess the exact scope and impact of any proposed legislation or policy on the people they represent.

In view of the foregoing, the question to ask is *what role does the Research, Public and International Relations Department play to ensure that Members of Parliament discharge their legislative function effectively?*

## **FUNCTIONS OF THE RESEARCH SECTION**

Before answering the question on how the research services contribute to the law making process, a brief highlight of the functions of the Research Section is outlined below:

The functions of the section include the following:

- (i) to provide Members of Parliament oral or written information on various matters or subjects that come before the House;

- (ii) to provide Members of Parliament with precise information on subjects connected with their duties as Members of Parliament, usually dealing with long or involving queries which would normally require a written reply;
- (iii) to conduct research on international affairs – this includes preparation of background papers on topics that are discussed at various international conferences, such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), etc;
- (iv) to prepare background papers on any legislation due to be introduced in Parliament;
- (v) to provide research services to parliamentary committees;
- (vi) to provide research services and act as secretariat for parliamentary caucuses such as the Parliamentary Caucus on Children (PCC) and the Zambia Parliamentary Caucus on Conservation (ZPCC);
- (vii) to disseminate information to the public on the procedures and practice of Parliament through publications of books, booklets and abstracts including sessional reviews of the sittings of Parliament;
- (viii) to carry out anticipatory research on topical issues at the initiative of the department through a demand by a Member(s) of Parliament;
- (ix) to broadcast parliamentary debates and development programmes on Parliament Radio;  
and
- (x) to conduct parliamentary outreach programmes.

## **CONTRIBUTION OF THE RESEARCH SECTION TO TOOLS AND MECHANISMS FOR OVERSIGHT IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**

There are a number of tools in which the legislature can hold the Government accountable for its actions and policies. These tools include parliamentary committees, questions to ministers, motions and budget oversight and ministerial statements.

## **1. Parliamentary committees**

With regard to the legislative process, once a Bill is read for the first time in the House at the First Reading Stage, it is referred to the appropriate portfolio committee for consideration. This allows the Committees to carry out an in-depth study of the Bill through consultations with various stakeholders who include the civil society organisations, private sector, professional bodies and other interested parties. Subsequently, Committees make necessary recommendations and submit reports to the House.

The committee requires information to critically scrutinize the Bill in detail and such information comes from various sources. The Research Section plays a key role in providing information to parliamentary committees. This is why in January, 2011, management decided to attach Research Officers to parliamentary committees in order to carry out research on issues before the committees. Previously, Committee Clerks prepared programmes of work and carried out research work without involving research staff. The initiative to attach Research Officers to committees is currently under review and is intended to enhance the collaboration of the two Departments in the provision of information to Members of Parliament.

## **2. Questions to Ministers**

This is one mechanism open to Back Bench Members of Parliament to probe the Executive on the performance of government policy and programmes. Ministers are given fourteen days in which to respond to oral questions. After a Minister has given a response, Members are allowed to ask supplementary questions to get further clarifications from the answers given by the Minister. In addition to oral questions, Ministers can be asked to provide written responses to questions, which also require fourteen days notice.

In addition, the Vice-President question time is held every Friday when the House is sitting for a maximum of thirty minutes so that the Vice-President can answer

questions from back bench Members of Parliament on any matter of national interest without notice. In order for Members of Parliament to ask questions from an informed position, they need accurate information to avoid hearsay and political rhetoric. In this regard, the Research Section plays a key role in providing well researched information to Members of Parliament.

### **3. Motions**

This is one area which the Research Section is very actively involved. In most cases Members of Parliament who wish to present a Motion in the House not only ask for advice, but also forward information requests on the subject matter they wish to focus on. Information is promptly provided which assists them to write comprehensive and coherent motions. However, they are motions which the research staff prepare for Members of Parliament. These include:

- Motion of Thanks to His Excellency the President's Address to the House; and
- Motion on the Budget Speech by the Hon. Minister of Finance.

### **4. Budget oversight through budget approval and audit process**

Through budget oversight, the National Assembly approves the annual budget and oversees government spending. Budget oversight is important in ensuring that public funds are utilized according to approved activities and in ascertaining whether desired outcomes have been achieved.

Once the budget has been presented to Parliament, it is referred to the Expanded Committee on Estimates which comprises all the members of the Estimates Committee and chairpersons of portfolio committees and the chairperson of the Reforms and Modernisation Committee for detailed analysis and scrutiny. In carrying out this important task, Members of Parliament require as much information as possible such as taxation measures and an overview of economic developments and medium term budget estimates. Similarly, Members of Parliament need a lot of

information when the Public Accounts Committee is considering the Report of the Auditor General.

Therefore, in addition to the experts outside parliament who are invited to assist Members of Parliament understand the budget, the need for the research department cannot be overemphasized especially that there is no Budget Office in the institution. The Research Officers play a key role in providing information to Members of Parliament who forward information requests regarding the budget.

To ensure that Research Officers are well vested with budget issues, training on budget analysis has been conducted from time to time and this has included other parliamentary staff.

## **5. Public hearings**

Public hearings are an important tool for the National Assembly to obtain information on a specific policy or issue of concern. Even though Research Officers are hardly involved in providing support services to parliamentary committees undertaking public hearings, they can play a key role in providing information regarding issues before the committees.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although Parliaments differ in their form and practice to suit their countries' political system, they have one aim in common, namely; to make Parliaments as effective as possible in order to meet the demands of the people who they represent. Thus, Parliaments worldwide play a vital role in the governance of their countries through their core functions of representation, legislation and oversight. Through their oversight functions, Parliaments ensure a balance of power, transparency and openness of Executive activities.

In order to support Members of Parliament discharge their legislative and oversight functions effectively, they need various services including information and research services. In the National Assembly of Zambia, the Library and Research, Public and International Relations Departments with the support of the ICT Department provide capacity building programmes for

research and library staff in order for them to understand the information needs of parliamentarians and how to search and present information in a user-friendly form. The National Assembly also collaborates with information providers such as the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERi) in order to benefit from the much needed expertise, as well as to access e-resources.